

CHAPTER 1

The Great War: A Review of the Explanations

World War I, once called the Great War, seems to defy explanation. Why did it happen? Numerous books on the subject carry the words “causes” or “origins” in their titles. The literature on the subject is extensive, probably the largest for any war in human history.

To address that basic question, a review of wars over the previous three centuries proves useful. And for this purpose a key term, world war, needs definition. We define a world war as one involving five or more major powers and with military operations on two or more continents. Since central Europe tore itself apart during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), eight wars fit this definition. They are the War of the Grand Alliance, 1689–97; the War of the Spanish Succession, 1701–14; the War of the Austrian Succession, 1740–48; the Seven Years’ War, 1756–63; the French Revolutionary Wars, 1792–1802; the Napoleonic Wars, 1803–15; then, after a ninety-nine-year interlude, World War I, 1914–18; and, two decades later, World War II, 1939–45. Following our definition and within this time span, the “Great War” was actually World War VII.

Those wars were massive and destructive. We have one crude measure of their “intensity,” defined as “total battle fatalities suffered by the involved great powers per million of European population.” Of the first six struggles, the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15) were by far the largest, with a fatality rate of 16,112. By this measure, the Great War was much more destructive at 57,616. That “intensity” was far exceeded in World War II at 93,665. Twenty-three smaller wars were fought within Europe between 1815 and 1914, these

typically involving two or three powers. The largest had a fatality rate of 1,743.

These intensity figures are the best available estimates. They involve fair-sized margins for error, in most instances errors of underestimation. Civilian deaths, principally those from hunger and disease, are not included, nor are the deaths suffered by smaller countries. The absolute number of deaths due to World War I was clearly enormous, one source giving a total of 14,663,000. The European losses in the war have been estimated at “about 4.1 percent” of the total population.

Seen in relative terms (losses per 1,000 of population), some other wars were much more destructive. The victorious Athenians put to death “all the grown men” of Melos in 416 B.C. The destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C., it is said, “was essentially total.” The German states lost one-fifth of their population in the Thirty Years’ War, Prussia one-seventh of its population in the Seven Years’ War. The most destructive war of all, one that receives very little attention, was a civil war, the Taiping rebellion in China (1851–64) with a loss of more than 30 million lives. We routinely focus on wars as big killing events but often neglect another even more lethal killing event. In March 1918 an influenza epidemic broke out among army recruits in Kansas. Subsequently called the Spanish flu, it spread within a year to all continents. Estimates of total deaths range from 25 million to 39 million, more than twice the World War I total.

World wars are costly ventures. The principal “actors” have to be rich nations with substantial intercontinental “outreach.” Rich, of course, is a relative term. The masses in a given nation might have been poor but that nation, relative to others, may be rich, sufficiently so as to allow it to sustain large armies and navies in distant struggles for extended periods. The Netherlands could do that in the seventeenth century when it was a rich nation. In the eighteenth century, when relative to other nations it was not so rich, the Netherlands was no longer a “great power.” China presents the opposite experience. It was once a rich nation with a demonstrated ability to “reach out,” but in 1433 by imperial decree the voyages ceased, overseas trade was severely restricted, and the construction of ocean-going ships stopped. Confucian-trained officials, it seems, “opposed trade and foreign contact on principle.” China’s foreign involvement ended.

The eight world wars were initiated by well-off, indeed rich, European nations. Most history textbooks emphasize the battles fought on the European continent, but in each case those wars were fought

also in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. In three of those wars, the English and French fought in India, with France ultimately losing out. And in four of them, the same contenders fought in North America. In 1763 the British gained the vast territories of New France. In the course of the same war, the British “took” Martinique, Grenada, Havana, and Manila (all later returned).

World wars, as defined here, require extensive economic, technological, and political development. Five or more nations had to generate considerable wealth, create capable naval forces, and acquire overseas empires. Basically, they had to establish and maintain relatively large military forces and send them enormous distances. That initially meant transport with large seagoing vessels that were effectively armed. Later, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, railroads, motor vehicles, and air transport came to be the decisive factors.

A military revolution occurred in the early modern period. The most important of the many changes was a considerable growth in the size of the armies. Those large forces could no longer “live off the land” – steal supplies from the populace. That change forced the creation of “the train,” a large number of horse-drawn wagons to carry foodstuffs, munitions, medical supplies, and so forth. The size of military operations increased accordingly with armies marching over several roads and converging later at the site of battle. For several reasons, the military was forced to give much greater emphasis to drill and discipline. Much more elaborate arrangements for command and control became necessary. War offices and admiralties were created to provide both the training and the command structures.

The military revolution increased the costs considerably. There were more soldiers to be fed, clothed, housed, armed, and trained. The number of infantry and artillery pieces required grew and, with the technological advances, the unit costs of those weapons also increased. The sources of wealth allowing this revolution were diverse – New World gold and silver as well as trade and commerce in commodities. Machine manufacture had a considerable impact, increasing national wealth and making new weapons possible.

A nation’s military capacity is limited by its economic strength, by its ability to pay. Our histories generally focus on monarchs and generals when discussing wars. But that overlooks another important figure: the finance minister. When the tax monies reach their limit and no further loans are possible, the war ends. Austria’s participation in the Seven Years’ War is a classic case in point. Campaigns were budgeted

for 10 million to 12 million florins per annum, but a single campaign in 1760 cost 44 million florins. Overall, the costs for the Seven Years' War came to 260 million florins. The war ended in large part when the finance minister told Maria Theresa that Vienna had reached its financial limit. The focus on political and military outcomes of wars sometimes leads to neglect of the economic consequences. The debts incurred by France in the Seven Years' War had serious impacts, especially with the added costs of its involvement in the American Revolution. The debt and resultant tax problems were important sources of the 1789 revolution.

Another economic linkage should be noted. Britain was likely the richest of the European nations on the eve of the French Revolution. Famous for its small army, its wealth allowed the nation to hire mercenaries and to provide subsidies to its allies. Above all, Britain's wealth, combined with its insular position and command of the seas, allowed it as much or as little of a European war as it desired. In raw figures, Britain spent £1,657 million on wartime expenditures between 1793 and 1815, up more than £1,400 million from the period 1776 to 1783. Much of that was to finance the various coalitions it formed against Napoleon Bonaparte.

The French Revolutionary Wars brought a second revolution in military affairs, the engagement of the citizenry. For the first time, rulers dared arm their subjects in vast numbers. Nationalism and patriotism rather than impressment and bad fortune would, presumably, prompt young men to take up arms. Military practice was dramatically altered, the number of men directly involved escalating considerably. Again, some words of caution should be added. The *de facto* achievements fell far short of the aspirations. Legislative decrees do not transform mass sentiments. Monarchists did not become Jacobins; faithful Catholics did not become ardent secularists.

Napoleon Bonaparte put the new principle into practice in his imperial wars from 1803 to 1815, the sixth of the world wars. For twelve years, the emperor and his subjugated allies fought wars against the Revolution's major-power opponents. Once again, the conflict extended well beyond the European continent: to the West Indies, Turkey, Egypt, and it had indirect effects in North America (the Louisiana purchase, the War of 1812) and Latin America (the wars of independence).

The first six of these world wars depended on "executive decisions" – rulers initiated and others responded. The decision-makers

typically consulted within an immediate circle of advisors. Imperialism, intercontinental outreach, was clearly involved although different in character from later efforts. The causal factors that gained prominence in the nineteenth century – nationalism, militarism, newspaper agitation, and “aroused masses” – scarcely appear in discussions of the first six of the world wars.

After the Napoleonic Wars there was a ninety-nine-year interlude without a world war. That did not mean years of peace but rather twenty-three smaller, more contained wars. The largest of these were two Russo-Turkish Wars (1828–29, 1877–78), the Crimean War (1853–56), and the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). Recognizing the enormous costs of the Napoleonic Wars, the leaders of the major powers agreed to form a Concert of Europe to prevent such outbreaks. But in July and August 1914 it failed completely. That ninety-nine-year interlude and the events leading to the breakdown will be reviewed in the following chapter.

Of the eight world wars, the Great War, called World War I, poses the most serious challenges with regard to explanation. The heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne was assassinated on 28 June 1914. The Austrian government alleged official Serb involvement, issued an ultimatum, and, rejecting negotiation, began hostilities on 29 July with a bombardment of Belgrade. In a linked series of decisions, four other major European powers – Russia, Germany, France, and Britain – joined the struggle. In all instances, the decision-makers recognized the hazards involved. They knew their choices could enlarge the conflict and significantly escalate the dimensions of the struggle. One German participant, Kurt Riezler, had argued, “Wars would no longer be fought but calculated.” The assumption underlying this “calculated risk” was that one power could enter the conflict without motivating the next power to make the same choice. Bluff, or offensive diplomacy, could be played, forcing other possible participants to desist. Ultimately, however, twenty-nine nations would be involved.

Most university-level history and social science courses that consider “the causes” of the Great War focus on “big” events, processes, or structures. Many accounts of the war’s origins begin with the alliance system and continue with discussions of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. All of these factors are “big” and all are routinely said to have had “powerful” impacts. They are, accordingly, treated as acceptable causes. Accounts that focused on individuals, on Emperor Franz

Joseph, Kaiser Wilhelm II, or Tsar Nicholas II, and on their outlooks, whims, and fancies, and on those of their closest advisors are viewed as “small.” The peculiar traits of an individual or the chance presence of a given person are treated as somehow unacceptable.

Alexis de Tocqueville anticipated the big-cause preference. “Historians who write in aristocratic ages,” he observed in his most famous work, “are inclined to refer all occurrences to the particular will and character of certain individuals: and they are apt to attribute the most important revolutions to slight accidents. They trace out the smallest causes with sagacity, and frequently leave the greatest unperceived.” Historians writing “in democratic ages exhibit precisely opposite characteristics. Most of them attribute hardly any influence to the individual over the destiny of the race, or to citizens over the fate of the people: but, on the other hand, they assign great general causes to all petty incidents.”

Tocqueville did not analyze modern societies in either–or terms, either general or particular causes, or, to use current terms, either structure or contingency. “For myself,” he wrote, “I am of the opinion that, at all times, one great portion of the events of this world are attributable to very general facts and another to special influences. These two kinds of cause are always in operation: only their proportion varies.” As may be seen in any of Tocqueville’s writings, his main concern was to sort things out, to generalize where it was appropriate and, where it was not, to particularize. The obvious imperative is that one should be guided by evidence, by the “facts of the case.” This is also our position.

The preceding discussion may be summarized with four generalizations:

First, World War I resulted from the decisions taken by the leaders of the great powers, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, France, and Britain.

Second, in those nations the decision to go to war was made by coteries of five, eight, or perhaps ten persons. Three of those nations were authoritarian regimes and there the decision-making was the work of a monarch and his chosen civilian and military leaders. France and Britain, with parliamentary regimes, had somewhat more complicated procedures, but there too the decisions were taken by small coteries.

Third, explanations for the war’s origins must center on the considerations that moved the members of those five groups of decision-makers. One must delineate the information, perceptions, and motives

involved in each case. The key question is what were the concerns that moved them? If the review of motivations reveals a common tendency – that the five coteries were moved by nationalism, militarism, and imperialism – a general conclusion, a focus on those big causes might be warranted. If, however, the agendas differed, some other explanatory “strategy” is appropriate.

The fourth generalization is concerned with constitutional arrangements. All countries have procedures, formal and informal, that specify who will participate in the decision to go to war. A curious gap appears in many narrative histories, also in comparative government and international relations texts, in that the question of “war powers” is rarely addressed. How did it happen that a given set of, say, six individuals made “the decision”? A few others may have played ancillary roles, but everyone else (persons, groups, or elites) in the nation was “out of it.” The procedures specifying “the war powers” provide “the cast” of decision-makers. They stipulate which individuals (or office holders) will be present. And those arrangements, in turn, would have impacts on the agendas brought to bear on the decisions. A narrowly based coterie consisting of the monarch, his chosen political leaders, and the heads of the military, might readily agree on a given agenda. Other elites – bankers, industrialists, press lords, clergy, or intellectuals – might have had different concerns and, if present, might have argued for other options.

Four of the five major powers had written constitutions, Great Britain being the exception. But the importance of those documents should be neither assumed nor exaggerated. Russia had a constitution after the 1905 revolution, but the tsar announced he would pay it little attention. The actual arrangements in those nations were loose, informal, and easily altered depending on *ad hoc* needs or personal fancy. A determined ruler could bring others into the decision-making. A lazy monarch could, either by plan or indifference, delegate power. An aggressive and/or astute minister could enhance his power or, at minimum, could cajole an easily influenced ruler. The authoritarian regimes showed unexpected capacities to resist the “advance of democracy” and, in some instances, to reverse the movement.

We are trained to think of constitutions as indications of progress, as steps setting limits to arbitrary rule. But these constitutions were not as “progressive” as one might think. One of the powers that remained, unambiguously, in the hands of the old-regime elites in Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia was the power to declare war. The German

constitution specified that the powers “to declare war and to conclude peace” rested solely with the kaiser. His decision for war required the approval of the Federal Council, or Bundesrat, the Upper House of the legislature. In republican France, the decision-makers, officially, were the premier, the Cabinet, and the Chamber of Deputies. In fact, however, the decision was largely the work of the president and the premier. Britain was a constitutional monarchy with cabinet government. Formally, the prime minister and his Cabinet (fifteen or twenty of his appointees) had “the power.” The decision for war required a majority vote in Cabinet and a tiny minority led by Edward Grey, the foreign secretary, generated that majority and brought about the final decision. The American constitution is strikingly different: it stipulates that “Congress shall have the Power . . . to declare War.” But the decision in 1917, as will be seen, was largely the work of one man, Woodrow Wilson.

Another constitutional factor needs consideration. In all of these countries the “power of the purse” was vested with a broadly based legislature. In Germany, for example, the Reichstag had the authority to say “no” to the war budget. It is one of the great “what ifs” of history: What if a majority had voted “no” on 4 August? But that did not happen, a problem that deserves attention. The issue comes up regularly in leftist historiography, the Socialist parties, presumably, being the most likely nay-sayers. In a moment of crisis, when the nation appears to be under attack, a “no” vote is a difficult choice.

One important implication follows from these guiding assumptions. A decision for war made by a small coterie means that contingency is highly likely. Misinformation, weak nerves, ego-strength, misjudgment of intentions and of consequences, and difficulties in timing are inherent in the process. Put differently, diverse choices are easy to imagine. In the midst of the crisis, two monarchs, Tsar Nicholas and Kaiser Wilhelm, did say “no” to the war. But both men were then convinced by others in their coteries to reverse those decisions.

As of 1919, the dominant explanation, one written into the Versailles Treaty, was intentionalist: basically, that Germany was to blame for the catastrophe. But revisionist views came quickly, some expressed by leaders of the victorious powers. The new readings were summarized in a compendious history by Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War* (1928). In an opening chapter on the “Immediate and Underlying Causes,” Fay discussed the early readings on the subject, reviewed and commented on recently published documents,

and finally considered five “underlying” causes – the system of secret alliances, militarism, nationalism, economic imperialism, and the press. Four of those causes appear routinely in present-day histories but the argument of newspaper agitation has largely disappeared. Many accounts add another cause, social Darwinism, to the basic list. Some authors argue “domestic sources,” that some or all of the powers chose war to head off internal dissent. Another option, one that appeared immediately after the war’s end, is the argument of a “slide.” This declares the Great War to have been an accident, an event neither intended nor foreseen by any of the decision-makers. Some authors argue multiple causation, combinations of the above. Social Darwinism, for example, stimulated imperialism which in turn required the expansion of armies and navies.

We will discuss first the alliance-systems argument and then consider the others in the following sequence: nationalism, social Darwinism, imperialism, militarism, the press, domestic sources, and the argument of a “slide.”

The “alliance system” refers to treaties that, allegedly, determined the August 1914 choices. As of 1907 Europe was divided between two power blocs: the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy and the *entente cordiale* of France, Russia, and Great Britain. The 1920s’ revisionists argue the binding character of those treaties. If a member of the Alliance were attacked (an unprovoked aggression), the others were obliged to come to that member’s defense. The members of the *entente* also, it was said, had similar obligations.

A review of the initial steps taken by the major powers in July and August of 1914 shows the inadequacy of this position. Austria-Hungary’s leaders decided to punish Serbia for the killing of Archduke Ferdinand. Their first action was to consult with Germany’s leaders, who readily assured the Austrians of their support. A month later, after much discussion and vacillation, Russia’s leaders decided to help Serbia and announced a partial mobilization directed against Austria-Hungary. The next day, pressed by his generals, Tsar Nicholas ordered a full mobilization, one directed also against Germany. That nation’s leaders defined Russia’s mobilization as an act of war and, arguing the need for defense, announced a general mobilization. On 28 July Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. The first military action came the next day with the bombardment of Belgrade. On 1 August Germany declared war on Russia and its troops entered Luxembourg. On that day also, France ordered general mobilization for the following

day. On 3 August Germany declared war on France; on 4 August their forces entered Belgium, whereupon Britain declared war on Germany.

None of those decisions for war was mandated by treaty obligations. Those choices were all “situational,” decisions made in response to immediate events. Germany was obliged by treaty to aid Austria-Hungary only if one or more of the *entente* powers engaged in unprovoked aggression. The Dual Monarchy’s move against Serbia, accordingly, did not in any way obligate Germany. Italy’s leaders recognized that move against Serbia as a provocation and, citing the terms of the Alliance, declared their country’s neutrality.

The logic of the alliance-system argument is improbable. The “men of 1914” are routinely depicted as tough, aggressive, and ruthless in pursuit of their aims. Yet here they are portrayed as honorable men faithfully defending the “sanctity” of treaty agreements no matter the costs. But political leaders repeatedly have rejected that course. In 1870, for example, William Gladstone, Britain’s prime minister and a very honorable man, said he could not accept “the doctrine [that] a guarantee is binding on every party to it” irrespective “of the particular position in which it may find itself . . . when the occasion for acting on the guarantee arises.” The great authorities on foreign policy, he declared, “never, to my knowledge, took that rigid and, if I may say so, that impracticable view of a guarantee.” In 1908 Italy’s King Vittorio Emanuele III, unhappy with the action of one of his Alliance partners, made this comment: “I am more than ever convinced of the utter worthlessness of treaties or any agreements written on paper. They are worth the value of the paper.” In short, the leaders of major powers recognized the tenuous nature of treaty terms.

Only the Franco-Russian alliance was unambiguous: both powers agreed to mobilize their forces in case one or more of the Triple Alliance powers mobilized. Quite apart from “the letter” of the agreement, French and Russian leaders were generally disposed to accept those terms. But even here there were sources of concern and anxiety. Would the partner honor the commitment? Or would fear and anxiety obviate formal contractual agreements? Again, when Britain and France signed their *entente* in 1904, St. Petersburg feared this accommodation might prompt Paris to renege on its treaty obligation in case of a Russian clash with Britain. In the wake of the Russo-Japanese War, there was deep-seated fear in Russia whether France might reassess the value of the alliance in the wake of Russia’s humiliating defeat. Thus, during joint staff talks held at Paris in April 1906, the